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AUTHOR Sommers, Elizabeth
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ABSTRACT

It can be very difficult for writers to invent classroom communities, to share their writing; it can be especially difficult for anxious young writers who have never before worked in peer groups. Student participation is largely influenced by gender roles shaped by years of socialization. Teachers should not be startled by less female participation, a reflection of larger cultural patterns, since such non-participation conforms to numerous research studies. Many researchers have demonstrated differences between men's talk and women's talk differences that bear on attempts to create peer group situations in the classroom. Observation showed that two distinct types of all-female groups evolved in a year-long composition class: communal groups and compliant groups. Communal groups are talkative, encouraging, attentive, and respectful of each other's right to speak. They tend to take many risks and seem to have more authority and control over their learning processes. Compliant groups show some of the same characteristics, but they were placed together by the teacher, they have much shorter sessions, and the response rate is much lower. The women in the compliant groups remain reticent, offer comparatively little substantive feedback, and do not seem to see themselves as authority figures. Changing from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach is not enough. Individuals in groups need to be willing to communicate what they know, to go beyond prescribed gender roles, and to take risks. Women in particular may need help moving from being "good" to being authentic. Learning how to facilitate this process is one of the most important things writing teachers can do. (Fifteen references are attached.) (HB)

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Elizabeth Sommers
Assistant Professor of English, San Francisco State University
Conference on College Composition & Communication
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Elizabeth Sommers
Assistant Professor of English, San Francisco State University
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Peer Groups in Evolution:

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The first discovery I made when I started studying peer response groups wasn't surprising: it's hard for writers to invent classroom communities, to share their writing, probably hard for most of us, and probably harder at first for anxious young writers who have never worked in peer groups. Karen says it best in a process piece she wrote that includes a discussion of her first peer group meeting:

> Peer group was the most frightening experience. I sat at my desk thinking for hours on how I could improve this paper so that before I handed it in I felt it was the best of my work. I went through every comment made [by the teacher] and elaborated, revised and incorporated new ideas. The day came for me to read my paper to the peer group. I was so frustrated and horrified at my work. I dreaded having to walk into class. I was full of anxiety. I knew everyone in my peer group would laugh at my work. I started to read my paper out loud. I was so nervous I felt sick. They all listened and did not laugh. They actually liked my paper. My classmates liked my ideas and made me feel good about writing for the first time ever in all my years of school...

Karen's feelings are echoed by many of the students I've studied and taught. Given such emotional intensity, the social power of adolescent peer groups, and the force of many years of socialization, I wasn't surprised that both male and female students begin their work in student-directed peer response groups--groups in which they negotiate the rules and agenda-- by relying on the communication patterns they have been socialized to use, women talking differently from men. That is, writers first form classroom communities based on what they already know about language, verbal interaction, power, gender roles.

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And unless they want to forge a new way--unless we teach them and they want to learn and they're willing to take risks--their classroom communities continue to be based on what they already know about such things.

To explain how women's peer groups evolve, I start by summarizing the patterns of women's talk in two male-dominated groups in a first year composition class, findings from an earlier part of this study. After talking about the women's communication differences and their reticence in male-dominated groups, I talk about some of the scholarship on women and language. Next, I look at two all-female peer groups later in the course--groups which have had a chance to evolve over time--and show some ways that they differ from these early male-dominated groups. Finally, I point out the implications for teachers using peer response groups in writing classrooms.

Through a qualitative analysis of peer transcripts, I learned that the women in four student-directed peer groups made 17% fewer comments than their male peers and took 25.1% fewer turns. During the turns they did take, female respondents tended to acquiesce more, to be interrupted more, and to initiate less (Sommers & Lawrence, in press).

While I was unhappy to see these patterns in my students' peer response groups, I wasn't flabbergasted. Many others working on gender, speech and communication patterns have also observed inequality. Dale Spender (1980, 1982) and other scholars have pointed out that while virtually every research study in every context has shown otherwise, women are still perceived as being more talkative than men. We worry about this. It isn't feminine. Gloria Steinem suggests that women stifle our own voices, our own thoughts, trying to avoid feeding into these stereotypical ideas (1983). Ursula LeGuin (1986) differentiates between the mother tongue and the father tongue, calling the father tongue

patriarchal, powerful--the stuff public discourse is made of--and believes that the mother tongue is devalued as "...inferior....coarse, limited, trivial" (p. 149). She invites women to unlearn what we learned in college--that father tongue--but recognizes that until women do, we will be less powerful, even powerless.

We shouldn't be startled that the situation in our classrooms reflects larger cultural patterns. Classroom research by Hall and Sandler (1982) and Sadker and Sadker (1990), among many others, has long shown that women talk less than men, that even feminist teachers call on women students less often, that women are more hesitant to speak than men and interrupted more often when we do. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) theorize in *Women's Ways of Knowing* that women may need a different way of teaching because women's needs are not now being met in many college classrooms. Pamela Annas (1987) writes specifically of silence and the teaching of writing, connecting the issue--which isn't a problem, necessarily--to feminist language research. Power, she points out, may be even more important than the sexism encoded into our language, power "...to name, to speak, and to expect that one's words will be heard and valued" (p. 6).

Annas goes on to discuss academic forums, situations in which all participants are expected to debate, compete, criticize, argue--in short, to use what many feminists believe to be a patriarchal mode of discourse. But are all of our students really welcome in such a "chilly climate?" Young women, uneasy at giving up their own language--and implicitly their own selves--are often not very willing to participate in such activities. It's understandable. Why would anyone want to give up her self? And what if our classrooms offer our women students little choice--except for silence? What if in our classrooms we inadvertently help students to reinvent the power structures that seem so "natural"?

In *Composing as a Woman* (1990), Flynn pushes the notion of power even further, arguing that "...ultimately questions of difference are questions of power, questions of whose interpretations of reality will prevail and of whose decisions will construct that reality" (p. 124). Telling us to recognize that power has always been unfairly divided between men and women, Flynn urges us to encourage our women students to write "...from the power of their experience." I believe we should also encourage our women students to speak and interact in powerful and authentic ways. But what if women's talk doesn't sound like academic talk? What if women's interactions don't seem academic?

Now I was aware of many of these issues when I asked students to work in peer response groups, to invent classroom communities. But I was also optimistic, somehow thinking that by training peer response groups carefully, then removing the teacher from the center stage--temporarily silencing that voice of reason, that voice of academic judgment--I might change these patterns, might help women and men students to articulate their own ideas, to formulate their own ways of knowing, to develop their own ways of helping one another.

I later found that the literature on gender in peer groups--still a very small body of work--partially confirms my finding that women tend to be more silent in student-directed small group situations. Thomas Fox, for example, conducted a case study of a young woman student, finding she had "...a habit of public deportment that is silent, skeptical, and keeps important knowledge private." According to Fox, "This stance prevents her from actively using her knowledge in the public arena" (1990, p. 56).

The research on small groups shows the issues are complex, though. Not all young women talk less than their male peers. Elizabeth Aries (1982) doubted that college women in small groups would be submissive, and she did find that

young women talked even more than young men. But what did they talk about? They reacted to men's agendas, men's information, men's opinions. The research study I conducted with Sandy Lawrence tends to corroborate Aries'. While the women in teacher-directed peer groups talked about one-third more often than the women in student-directed peer groups, almost as much as men, our study suggests that the women students talked as much as they did because they tried so hard and in so many different ways to help their peers, both males and females, to work on their papers. Male students, in contrast, tended to speak as much as women but differently. For example, they offered fewer suggestions, tending to list criticisms without elaborating on ways to improve the drafts (Sommers & Lawrence, in press).

Another difference between men's talk and women's talk involves presentation-of-self. The women we studied tended to present their ideas as the views of only one person rather than as universal truths. "I think...," they said time and time again, or "I feel." This feature, which we call presentation-of-self and which Rubin and Greene (1992) call "egocentric sequences," marked their talk again and again. Male students, again in contrast, used "I think" and "I feel" much less often. I'm not saying men's talk is necessarily better or worse, more or less useful, but it is <u>different</u> in both teacher-directed and student-directed peer groups.

After recognizing the lower frequency of women's talk in mixed gender peer groups, I began to study some of the female groups as they evolved later in my year-long composition class. Dale Spender (1980) and many others stress the importance of looking at women's talk in context, and she and others have shown that mixed gender groups are like all-male groups. I wanted to explore the talk in female groups which had time to evolve, to create their own rules and

agendas, to experiment with their new knowledge about written language. Would these groups of women also experiment with verbal interaction, power, and gender roles?

I'm finding that two distinct types of female groups are evolving: communal groups and compliant groups. The communal groups are talkative, involved and supportive; their transcribed discussions are ten to fifteen pages long, often three times the length of other student-directed groups. Not incidentally, they are often self-selected groups, women working together for serious reasons: they want to get and give high quality response to their work. The women in one of these groups, for example, began about halfway through the course to negotiate themselves into these communal response groups. These young women would arrive early to class on peer response days, drafts and copies in hand, asking to work together. They'd started earlier, they said, and planned to continue later. It was important to them to work together.

As a researcher now studying their work, I understand these young women constructed a remarkably positive and helpful workspace, what Annas searches for in her own classrooms--the kind of space Adrienne Rich (1979) tells us to build in "Taking Women Students Seriously"--supportive and rigorous, helpful and critical. First, they seldom interrupt one another except with affirming or acknowledging phrases. One young woman, Lisa, speaks in a faltering speech pattern, so fragmented it was hard to transcribe. It's also hard to listen to. Yet her peers almost never interrupt her during a peer group session that lasts over half an hour, except to agree or to encourage her. They never once take the floor from Lisa as male peers do again and again in our earlier study.

Here's an example of Lisa's faltering speech patterns, the content of her comments and the writer's responses. Note that Karla, the writer, takes brief turns acknowledging Lisa:

Lisa: Um. OK...the first thing that I say is that if any of my comments are...biased...

Karla: Mmmhmm.

Lisa: Tell me, because I really don't mean them to be.

Karla: Mmmhmm.

Lisa: But...I am...I have picked out things I think that...maybe...I mean, I guess like Susan said, I mean...well, I mean...if you....if you're doing you know, like...against...if you're obviously writing a paper against the death penalty then you know, you've got to be...but you...that's the...the parts most like, you know...um...be...like supporting in the, you know, supporting in that um...they can't be anything...you know...they can't be loopholes for the...for like...

Karla: Yeah.

Lisa goes on to take *fifty* more turns, some many sentences in length, helping Karla to develop her argument against the death penalty, offering encouragement, praise and, most of all, suggestions that seem uncommonly useful: to consider statistics about handgun regulations and other facts from other countries; to think through the religious issues in more depth; to include a Biblical reference--an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; to avoid offending the reader with a comment about raping the rapist; to make more explicit connections; to find statistics about the success or failure of rehabilitation attempts; to think through the idea that waiting for execution is so psychologically painful for the convicted criminal that it takes precedence over

victims' pain; to use economic costs of the death penalty to her advantage; to rely above all on the declaration of human rights.

Lisa is generous in another way as well: she personally is very much FOR the death penalty, and doesn't believe any of the arguments she encourages Karla to make. She makes this stance clear from the beginning, warning Karla that her comments "are not supposed to be biased, but I'm sure some of them might be." But although she is very much for the death penalty, Lisa believes even more strongly that each person must decide herself what position is morally justifiable to her. This leads to a very interesting exchange among the young women:

Lisa: ...OK, I agree, it is probably cruel and inhumane. But...I think you should just say I...if you're going to still say it, I think you should just say I feel?

Karla: Mmm.

Lisa: Cause like morally wrong is...it's sort of like...

Karla: OK.

Lisa: It's just that...

Susan: ///in fact...

Karla: Yeah...

Lisa: I think it's just an opinion? So just put "I feel" or some...Or "I think" or something?

Karla: OK.

Lisa seems to be talking here about the relativity of truth and of morality. Women have often been criticized for this use of "I think" or "I feel," those markers which we noticed distinguish women's speech throughout our earlier study, but Lisa seems to be saying that they need to use such words and should

do so intentionally, knowing that their private ideas and private truths are not universal and cannot be.

In comparison, the second type of groups, the compliant groups, have a few of the characteristics of communal groups: they also tend to be polite to one another and to give everybody a chance to speak. Members express their ideas without tending to interrupt one another. They reassure the writer often and they seem optimistic about the draft. They use many statements that include "I think" and "I feel." But the contrasts are striking. First, they were all placed together by the teacher. Second, their sessions are much shorter than the communal groups', three or four pages compared to twelve to fifteen pages. In other words, compliant groups' response rate was much lower.

This is because the women in these groups tend to discuss issues only in superficial ways, reaching premature closure, usually telling the writer that her draft is essentially fine even if it needs a lot of work. Here's an example. Karen, the writer, has written a problem/solution analysis about the influx of Cuban refugees into Miami and has asked for help with detail about the problem and its solutions and the flow of the paper. Ellen takes the floor. She gives some brief suggestions on developing the problem--about fifty words--before this point:[1]

Ellen: Discuss that a little more [how the refugees affect the city]. At the beginning, so that you know why you want them out so badly? And...I thought it was good. Overall, I mean...you have like...three solutions...which is a lot to have for a problem. Um...also...in like the second paragraph, you used overwhelming a couple of times.

Karen: Mmmhmm.

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[1]Deleted first part: "OK. Um...I think that at the beginning, maybe? You should, um, discuss how they affected...that's the community more? Like what they do, how much they speak Spanish, how...you know, you know how you discussed that once with me about what they do? How they interfere with the whole...the lives of all of you?

Ellen: Maybe if you could think of a different word?

Karen: [laughs]

Ellen: You know? I do that, too. You know? A lot of the time. Um...I think the way you summed it up was really good. You like brought back everything that you...said at the beginning and...did a good job. I don't know. I think that's about it, though. If you just went into a little more detail. Cause otherwise it works well. I think.

Karen: OK.

Ellen: OK? You're welcome.

Jane: I thought it was a good paper. Um...like Ellen said, maybe define the problem a little more? Like what exactly do they do that hurts the community so much? And, um, I think your solutions are good. Maybe go into a little bit more depth. But otherwise, it works ///, I think.

Karen: OK.

Katy: I just thought you should define the problem some more, too [Karen laughs]...

The women, Ellen more than the others, attempt to give Karen some ideas to develop her essay. Two of them also tells her that her draft is "good." Ellen moves in her turn to word level repetition, suggesting an easy revision, reassuring Karen that she sometimes repeats words, too. But each woman tends to repeat one another's advice rather than elaborating on it or providing their own. They downplay the need for revision, assuring the writer that the necessary changes will be minimal. Karen needs only "a little more detail," "a little bit more depth." She just need to "define the problem some more..." The session lasts only about ten minutes because of the lack of specific suggestions,

and because Karen doesn't ask for more from the group. Still, the women end on an optimistic note, two of them reassuring the writer further:

Katy: But it was a good paper. I liked it a lot.

Ellen: Yeah. It's interesting.

Katy: It is, very.

Karen: Oh, thank you.

Since I knew these young women as their teacher--worked with them in writing conferences throughout the year, knew how engaged they were, how much they knew about writing, how much they cared about their own writing--I was puzzled by the lack of depth of their interaction, the simple repetition of one another's ideas, the premature closure. I wondered why some of them would demand so much from their own writing, but give so little to their peers.

Katy, for example, typically wrote outstanding analytical essays, draft after draft of them, revising extensively, poring over her ideas, their hidden meanings, their many possibilities. But she doesn't apply this highly developed expertise to Karen's piece in the ways the women in the communal groups tended to do. The reasons why are not clear. Was it an attempt to keep a positive atmosphere in the group? Politeness? Indifference? A sense that it was less complicated to echo the comments of her peers rather than saying what she really thought? Uncertainty about how to move from saying "I liked it a lot" to giving substantive feedback to the writer about the analysis of both the problems and solutions? Intuition that Karen, who is the young woman quoted at the beginning of this paper, has a hard time working in groups? Concern about how to tell Karen that her opinions about Cuban refugees could be construed as prejudicial?

The answers are not clear yet, but the patterns are forming slowly and surely. Women in student-directed mixed-gender groups tend to be more silent than men, at least early in the semester. Later, when working in groups of women, they tend to divide into communal and compliant groups. Women in both types of groups share certain characteristics: they are polite to one another, reassuring to the writer and optimistic about the possibilities of the draft.

But women in communal groups seem to have more authority and more control over their own learning process. They seem to know that learning and teaching are not necessarily teacher-bound, that their writing is their own. They tend to develop their suggestions and comments in much more depth than compliant groups. They tend to take a great many risks, trying not only to connect with the writer but to help her to revise, providing a wealth of suggestions with a lot of encouragement. As Belenky and her colleagues explain (pp. 118-119), "in connected-knowing groups people utter half-baked half-truths and ask others to nurture them...authority in connected knowledge rests not on power or status or certification but on commonality of experience..." In these communal contexts, women often seem to have embarked together on developing voice, self and mind.

The women in compliant groups, in contrast, seem to value affiliation more than feedback, and seem to choke off their comments, maybe because they believe more authentic response might jeopardize the relationships within the group. The women in these groups often seem to be working obediently on a teacher-assigned task. Rather than taking control, as the communal groups do, the women in compliant groups remain reticent, offering comparatively little substantive feedback. They don't seem to see themselves as authority figures. They don't seem to have internalized the idea that they can teach their peers by

sharing their knowledge, or that this might be valuable. These women seem more courteous than engaged, more dutiful than motivated. They seem to have a problem: since the teacher as authority is not there, the knowledge has vanished, too.

Belenky and her colleagues can offer many insights into what is happening in compliant groups. I'll confine myself to just one, though. They warn us (p. 209) that "the student's discovery that teachers respect her authentic voice is gratifying, of course, but for many of the women we interviewed, it came late. Much time had been wasted being good; and for many women the relentless effort to be good had prevented the development of a more authentic voice."

Of course, it's impossible to generalize from the few studies I've discussed today. I also want to stress that these patterns may hold true for men as well; they aren't necessarily women's patterns alone, or static patterns. But these studies and many others do indicate that women speak differently from men. Women's roles in peer response groups are different, too, and they seem to evolve in different ways. We need to study more, to find out how we can truly empower our students if that's what we want to do. Changing from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach isn't enough. Individuals in groups seem to need to take a psychological step: They need to be willing to communicate what they know, to go beyond prescribed gender roles and social roles, to take risks, to trust one another's ways of knowing. Women in particular may need help moving from being <u>good</u> to being <u>authentic</u>. Learning how to facilitate such a process is one of the most important things we can do as writing teachers. In fact, what could be more important?

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